

THE OLD MILL ON THE ELKHORN*

BY JAMES LANE ALLEN

Perhaps few streams in America flow through a landscape more rich and beautiful than the Kentucky Elkhorn. Past the rolling acres of peaceful, prosperous farmers, past secluded homesteads, the green lawns which slope gently to its banks, winding now through fields of heavy-headed wheat or feathery hemp or bending maize, sometimes forming into deep, still woodland pools haunted by the bass, at other times broadening into shallows that flash across beds of brown stones and emerald moss—it wanders on and on, with many a backward turn as if loath to pass away and with many a murmur of farewell to the scenes it is forever leaving.

Great trees grow on its banks and bend to each other above its mirroring surface: ancient oaks, rich gnarled walnuts and gigantic glistening sycamores with leopard-spotted limbs. On its banks, also, from earliest spring till late autumn, appear in long succession the many-numbered race of wild flowers—beds of violets, blue and white, pink-fringed and ox-eyed daisies, clumps of elder bloom, rich in color like old lace, fields of goldenrod and luxuriant growths of ironwood, tufted with royal purple.

On its fresh hillsides and clover-matted slopes flocks of long-wooled sheep seem always to be grazing; in the knee-deep verdure of the meadows herds of ponderous, soft-eyed cattle, half in sunlight, half in the shadows of drooping elms, are always grouping themselves into pictures of pastoral peace; and from out the woodland pastures the long-legged thoroughbreds, as light and mild as deer, come down to drink beauty and fleetness from its nourishing waters.

But follow its course through the changing scenery of

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the land or past all the kindly aspects of human life, and nothing that the eye rests upon will more deeply touch the imagination or the heart than the sight here and there of its half-hidden, half-forgotten, thick-walled, gray-stone mills. No other memorials preserve so well as these the traces of a simple industry once everywhere common but now fast vanishing or quite extinct. No other landmarks point so plainly to the erstwhile quieter manners and ways of rural life, or recall with vividness so overshadowed with regret the happy, rustic pictures of bygone years. Weather-stained and crumbling creek-side mills of the past! Progress has abandoned them, and now looks with good-natured contempt upon what was once the source of its honor and its pride. But, although the days of their usefulness are over—although they stand silent, motionless ruins amid the ever-young harvest-fields which are garnered for them no longer—to many an eye the snow-white foam still falls in dreamy cascades from their ponderous, blackened wheels, and many an ear still gathers to itself all the melodies of their vanished happiness.

Under the shade of some tree in sight of one throw yourself upon the green turf, close your eyes and let memory take its course.

Once more it is a summer day—the long, summer day of boundless leisure and a quiet world. The calm blue of the sky overhead is not ruffled by a single passing cloud. Drowsily from the shimmering fields that spread their green and golden bounty on all the slopes of the surrounding farms come the notes of the quail. There are no other sounds than these except the trickle of the shadowy waters under the mill, or of some little cataract that flows fitfully across the dark-gray dam. The miller, dressed in homespun blue, sits in the open door of the mill, his head dropped forward on his breast—asleep. Asleep is the huge wheel of the mill a few feet away. Asleep in the pools of the creek that wind below are the muddy, black swine, their snouts hidden beneath smartweed and dog fennel. Asleep is the turtle that has crept forth upon a rotting snag in the current of the ford. Even the restless blue-winged snake-doctors seem asleep on jutting points of stone.

Then slowly down the opposite lane comes the millboy astride his bag of corn. The neck of his white cotton shirt is open down his bosom and he wears a straw hat, the torn rim of which rests on his shoulder. His feet are bare and newly scratched with briars, and his lips are stained with the wayside blackberries that he has loitered to enjoy. On the gentle neck of his old white mare lies the rope rein of the blind bridle, as he presses to his mouth, half in a dream, the homemade cherry whistle with which he has been blowing away solitude from his tedious path. Slowly he emerges from the mouth of the lane, and then, as he catches sight of the miller asleep in the doorway across the creek, with a shout that sends the echoes flying he calls to him to wake up and grind his corn.

What a world of rural peace and plenty belongs to them! By what a realm of pure and happy hearthstones are they surrounded! What pictures of innocent love and hallowed marriage rise in the memory as the tokens and the rewards of such simplicity!

But there stands today on the banks of the Elkhorn an old mill which brings to the minds of those who know its history none but the most saddening reminiscences. And few people there are living in that region of Kentucky to whom its history is not known. For many a year now it has furnished the theme for talk around evening hearthstones, when there were no children present to be affected by the tale. Many a sermon it has become the text of at the country church half a mile up the creek, when on Sunday mornings the well-dressed young farmers were seated in the pews beside their comely wives. And many a time the blacksmith, whose shop is at the crossroads opposite the church, has dropped the half-shod foot of a horse from his leather apron, and, wiping his sweating forehead with his bared and sooty arm, has paused to tell the story with a face full of fierce sorrow to some eagerly listening traveller. Nor, perhaps, has any traveller, after having heard the story, ever allowed his horse to drink at the ford above which the old mill stands, without bending upon it his long and mournful gaze. Well for him if, with a shadow of alarm darkening his face, he has not then suddenly urged

on the pace of his horse, with dark thoughts of his beloved wife at home.

More than any picture of ruin the old mill stands to the eye of any beholder who is acquainted with its past. Worse than all natural decay is the air of abandonment which changes it into a symbol of human desolation. Not the sight of its roof, rotten and fallen in, or thought of the snows of winter that sift down and melt away unheeded—not the summer weeds and grasses which rankle above the mold of the overturned wheel—not the hinges rusting in the doorless walls or the millstones split by frost—give to the spot its power over the imagination or throw about it an atmosphere pervaded with the suggestions of human sorrow.

Its history may be briefly told. It was built a good many years ago by a wealthy farmer of that region, who chose to indulge himself in the luxury of grinding his own wheat and corn for his own table, and for the abundant tables of his numerous slaves. It was a fine thing to him also to grind for his neighbors, inasmuch as this was not a necessity. Moreover, on wet days when he did not care to go to town and could not ride out into the fields, he was sure of finding company at the mill; and many a jovial hour he and his friends, whose habits of life were as free and easy as his own, spent there in company, planning a fox-chase or a barbecue, or discussing the prices of negroes and mules.

The luxurious ideals of his class bore their hard and bitter fruit in season, and by the time the war broke out his rich estate was heavily mortgaged. During that great struggle he, with his eldest son, fell fighting with the armies on one side; his second son fell on the other; and the youngest—the sole survivor—came home when peace returned, having himself just reached the period of early manhood.

His first act was to pay off the debts of the estate; and when this was done he found that enough was left him to retain as his the mill and a few acres of woodland pasture which adjoined it and sloped gradually from the bank of the creek to the fertile fields beyond. Something better might have been expected of him perhaps than that he should settle down to the life of a miller on a fragment of

the estate which had once been his home; but he was sick of a roving life, and yearned for the quietude and ties of familiar associations. Nor was there any other place left him which seemed so homelike as the mill, and he could not bear the thought that this also should pass into other hands.

Every nook and recess of it was stored with a thousand memories of his childhood. As a youth he had sometimes been allowed to run it, with a strange sense of delight in his power to govern its mighty movements; and afterwards, many a night, when thousands of miles away, he had wrapped himself in his blanket and lain down to sleep beside the dying camp fires, with its low music filling his dreams until the morning of the footsore march. But above all, the reason for his settling down so quickly and contentedly in his old neighborhood was the fact that within a week from the time of his returning to it he was ardently in love, and within a year had built a pretty, cottage-like home halfway up the woodland adjoining the mill, and had married.

Poor Meriwether! For I shall call him Meriwether, out of respect for the privacy of his real name. He was withal the most lovable man I have ever known. He was robustly formed, and had a face that indicated a strange mixture of courage and good humor; and he was endowed with a simple trustfulness of nature toward whatever he loved that bespoke the ardor and honor of his own character.

His marriage was one of those marriages of perfect love that sometimes, at least, are made in real life. His wife was the daughter of a farmer, whose estate had adjoined his father's, and he had known her since childhood. At the log schoolhouse down the lane, distant three-quarters of a mile from the mill, they had been together through many a session's adventures—through the hickory-nut hunting and the gathering of wild grapes. During the long prayers in the little church on Sunday mornings many a time they had stolen glances at each other across the high wooden partition which divided the women from the men. And when one day, dressed in uniform and looking strangely handsome, he had unexpectedly presented himself and told

her that he had come to say good-by, with trembling fingers she had pinned a rose on his bosom and had burst into tears as he put his arms around her and kissed her, and then was gone.

But she had forgotten all this by the time the war was over. She allowed herself to be introduced to him with a charming affectation when she met him for the first time in the churchyard after the sermon. She had grown very pretty, meantime, and there were half a dozen young farmers in the neighborhood whose attentions she was receiving. Meriwether, on the other hand, had also come to manhood—bringing back with him along with his brown soldier's face, the handsomer for a thick mustache, that romantic attraction with which one is invested who returns from heroic battlefields. But most of all, he had brought back with him a heart-hunger for the society of women, that showed itself in the steady light of his eyes, in the trembling tones of his voice, and the clinging pressure of his rough hand.

And so she fell in love with him—alas! he had loved her all the time—and so, as I have said, they were married within a year.

And so I say again, poor Meriwether! During the year that followed upon their marriage how happy he was! Business was everywhere reviving in the country, and the mill, which he had newly equipped, was kept running from morning till night. A few hundred yards up the hill was his home with his young wife in it. He would often spring up the footpath to snatch a kiss from her between times; and when she in turn would noiselessly enter the mill, where he was always whistling or singing with thoughts of her, he would strain her to his heart, which seemed ready to burst with too much happiness. This happiness, perhaps, there will be none so niggard as to begrudge him.

During that period many persons were passing from the North southward in search of new fortunes; and toward the autumn of the next year the trustees of the school in the lane happened upon and secured the services of a young Mr. Charles Fletcher for the next session. He came directly from Ohio, but said his home was in the state of New York. One of the trustees brought Mr. Fletcher home with

him one Saturday afternoon from the neighboring town; and at church the next morning, after the custom of the people, the young teacher made the acquaintance of most of the neighbors, among whom were Meriwether and his wife. Meriwether was called aside at that moment, and it was noticed by several persons that Mr. Fletcher and Mrs. Meriwether seemed to fall at once into sprightly talk and that she exhibited to him her prettiest manners.

During the week Mr. Fletcher visited from place to place in the neighborhood, making up his school; but there was much difficulty in settling where he should live. A formal meeting of the trustees was held at the blacksmith shop to consider the subject, Mr. Fletcher being also present; and it was he who finally proposed, all other proposals seeming to fail, that he should live with the Meriwethers. Strangely enough, no one had thought of this, which would be a capital arrangement. One of the trustees jumped on his horse and rode down to the mill and laid the matter before Meriwether. Meriwether was heartily willing, but said he would defer to the preference of his wife. When he consulted her a color came quickly into her face, and she gave reasons why Mr. Fletcher should not come; but when Meriwether said "Very well," she urged that Mr. Fletcher would be good company for him. Meriwether kissed her and said that he needed no other company, but at the end of that week Mr. Fletcher had come to live at the cottage.

He was handsome, intelligent and had fascinating manners. Meriwether was, if possible, happier than ever through his company. He had some one with whom to talk endlessly of his campaigns, or from whom he could hear endless talk of life at the North. His only source of secret regret was the reserve with which Mr. Fletcher treated his wife, and the dislike which his wife secretly professed to him that she felt for the young teacher.

Before many months passed, Mrs. Meriwether began to show an unusual interest in the school. She would frequently go down Friday afternoons when there was a special programme, and Mr. Fletcher would walk back with her. At first it had been his habit to come by the mill and stay there until Meriwether closed it for the night, and then

the two men would go home together. Now he began to go home directly from the schoolhouse, reaching it an hour before Meriwether returned. And thus the session came to an end.

When Mr. Fletcher had gone north for the summer, Meriwether's wife grew suddenly restless and visited much in the neighborhood, although hitherto she had stayed closely at home. Summer passed. At the opening of the autumn Mr. Fletcher was again at home with the Meriwethers. It was perhaps two months later that a young farmer of the neighborhood came to the mill one day and took Meriwether more warmly than usual by the hand, looking at him the while with eyes in which was the light of a man's sympathy. Then he sat down and talked of many things; of the mill, the church, the blacksmith-shop, the school, and Mr. Fletcher. His voice trembled strangely as he looked fixedly at Meriwether again and said that Mr. Fletcher was a man whom he should not like to have in his house. Meriwether defended the teacher. A month later two families in the neighborhood took their children from the school.

It was at the close of a dark day in December, a week after this, that Meriwether closed the mill for the night and sprang eagerly up the hillside toward his home. A wind swept gloomily through the great, ice-laden trees, causing the branches to groan aloud, and sending to his heart a thrill of delight in the warm fireside he was soon to reach. At a certain bend of the footpath he always came in sight of the ruddy panes; but tonight, when he reached this point, no kindly light met his eye. On his home lay the pall of darkness.

With a sudden chill of fear and great strides he sprang up the hillside and hurried into the house. There was not even a smoking ember on the hearth. He went to the kitchen. There was no fire in the stove. The old negro cook, as he afterwards learned, had early in the afternoon been sent on an errand to a distant neighbor's. He ran upstairs to Fletcher's room. It was fireless and deserted. Then he came slowly downstairs again and, in a voice tremulous with anguish and scarcely audible for the deathly

faintness that came over him, he called the name of his wife. Only the desolate echoes of his own voice came back to him.

He sped out under the lowering night to the nearest neighbor with inquiry, and then to another and another. Everywhere there met him only troubled faces and evasive replies, and all the vain but touching marks of sympathy. All had dreaded the tragedy save him.

Before that night of shame and sorrow passed, the miserable truth had forced itself upon him. When he came home again and had lit a lamp, he found that all the things of Fletcher had gone except an empty trunk; and when he had entered his own bedroom, set the lamp upon the table, and sat down in a chair beside it, slowly, one by one,—in opened drawers and familiar little articles of dress lying here and there as if forgotten,—he read the proofs of his fate.

The next day he was gone in pursuit. A month later he returned. To all those who would have questioned him he returned brief but kindly answers. He had heard of them, but he had not found them. For a while he lingered in the neighborhood, seeming like one who had lost all purpose of living. Then, as if finding the place intolerable, he went away without telling any one good-by. Some six months later he wrote back from Missouri, giving instructions to have his place sold, except the mill. He said that he wanted the money to go into business where he was, but that it might not turn out well and that he might wish to come back and start the mill again. It was a curious whim, as if of a sorely burdened and distracted brain.

Two years later he was heard from indirectly as being in Colorado, and after that as being in southern California. But since then a good many years have passed. It is not known whether he is longer living. Possibly he may be living under an assumed name in some spot where no connection with his past may ever reach him.

But, meantime, the ruins of the old mill stand on the banks of the Elkhorn.